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Joint Inspection Unit

Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system" (see A/70/686).

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Summary

In its report entitled "Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system" (see A/70/686), the Joint Inspection Unit examined the evolution, development and advancement of the evaluation function in the United Nations system to assess its growth, level of development and capacity to support organizations of the United Nations system, as well as any alternative approaches that may exist for an effective evaluation function.

The present note reflects the views of organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of inputs provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. In its report entitled "Analysis of the evaluation function in the United Nations system" (see A/70/686), the Joint Inspection Unit examined the evolution, development and advancement of the evaluation function in the United Nations system to assess its growth, level of development and capacity to support organizations of the United Nations system, as well as any alternative approaches that might exist for an effective evaluation function. In the report, the Unit covered the evaluation function of 28 United Nations system organizations and, through its nine recommendations to executive heads, legislative bodies and the Secretary-General in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), sought to improve the effectiveness of the function and improve harmonization and coherence.

II. General comments

2. Recognizing that the current international context demanded new approaches in development and humanitarian assistance, along with improved effectiveness, organizations of the United Nations system welcomed the report, noting that it was comprehensive and insightful.

3. Organizations acknowledged the importance of the evaluation function, as emphasized by the Unit in its analysis, and supported many of the recommendations in the report, which they noted were intended to strengthen and enhance this important function. Moreover, the report was highly relevant to the strategic direction needed across the United Nations to embed a culture of evaluation and use of evidence for the enhanced impact and sustainability of United Nations contributions.

4. In general, organizations found the recommendations clear and results-oriented, and appreciated that that the Unit had endeavoured to chart an evidence-based and strategically coherent path for the evaluation function in the United Nations system in order to meet the increasing demands and opportunities for accountability and learning. While some of the recommendations set a high bar for achievement, organizations found them attainable with high-level leadership and support; some organizations were already seeing the impact of implementing the recommendations of the Unit.

5. However, organizations also noted that some of the recommendations required specific funding at the organizational as well as the system-wide level, and further noted that, in an environment of fiscal austerity, such resources might prove difficult to identify, reducing the impact of implementation of the recommendations. Furthermore, organizations noted that some of the recommendations that pertained to decentralized evaluation work might present challenges for large, field-based organizations with complex mandates.

6. In addition, it was observed that some of the recommendations relating to evaluation body structures might present challenges to the smaller United Nations system entities. Those organizations noted that they had established evaluation functions that met their needs and might not be as elaborate as those in larger United Nations system entities; to rank all of them on the same scale might present a picture that was not entirely accurate. Furthermore, the evaluation of normative

work undertaken by the United Nations system was different from that of development work, and the review could have benefited from additional consideration to this distinction and the bearing that it had on the structure, role and responsibilities of the evaluation function in agencies with mandates in normative and technical areas.

7. Last, some organizations indicated that there was difficulty in comprehending the differences between many of the terms used to describe the various evaluation modalities, such as "central evaluation function", "decentralized evaluation function", "central evaluation unit", "evaluation function", "embedded evaluation functions" and "central evaluation function of the United Nations Secretariat", although they recognized the linkage between the complexity of terms in use across the entities of the United Nations system.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations in which the central evaluation function is co-located and integrated with other oversight functions or integrated with the executive management functions should enhance the function and ensure its quality, integrity, visibility and added value.

8. Organizations supported recommendation 1, although some would have preferred a clearer definition of the term "central evaluation unit".

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should adopt a balanced approach in addressing the purpose of evaluation for accountability, and for the development of a learning organization that has the appropriate incentive systems for innovation, risk-taking and the use of multidisciplinary perspectives.

9. Organizations of the United Nations system supported recommendation 2 and agreed that accountability should not be the sole driver for evaluation, but that the lessons learned from evaluation results were also useful tools for improvement. However, they also noted that to achieve the balance indicated would require some effort in building a learning culture, and that the recommendation could have been strengthened by including the actions or steps required of executive heads to make their entities into learning organizations.

Recommendation 3

The legislative bodies should request the executive heads of United Nations system organizations to develop comprehensive budget frameworks and resource allocation plans for their respective evaluation functions, based on the cost of maintaining an effective and sustainable evaluation function that adds value to the organization. The plans should be submitted for consideration to the legislative bodies within existing budgetary and reporting mechanisms and processes.

10. Noting that recommendation 3 was directed at legislative bodies, organizations agreed on the need for comprehensive budgetary frameworks for the evaluation functions and emphasized their value in setting resourcing targets and plans for the sustainable financing of evaluation activities. Organizations noted that the benefits of the recommendation would have a greater effect if it were also applied to the decentralized evaluation functions.

Recommendation 4

The legislative bodies should direct the executive heads of United Nations system organizations to review and revise, as necessary, existing policies for the appointment of the heads of evaluation offices, in order to enhance independence, integrity, ethics, credibility and inclusion, with due regard to the following criteria:

- **Term limits should be established for a single non-renewable term of office of between five and seven years, with no possibility for the incumbent of re-entry into the organization;**
- **The head of evaluation should have qualifications and substantial experience in evaluation, complemented by experience in the related fields of strategic planning, basic and operational research and knowledge management, and should have excellent management and leadership attributes.**

11. Noting that recommendation 4 was directed at legislative bodies, and with the understanding that it referred to the heads of the centralized evaluation functions, organizations supported the recommendation in general, although some expressed reservations with regard to the issue of term limits. Organizations noted that the evidence provided in the report indicated wide variation in practice with regard to term limits and the possibility of re-entry into the organization, and there did not appear to be any analysis that specifically linked the independence (perceived or real) and credibility of the evaluation functions with the term limit and rotation policy. While the limitation of re-entry into the organization might rest on a rationale of avoiding conflict of interest, the recommendation on the term limit policy did not appear to be supported by any clear evidence of its superiority over a "no term limit" policy. Taken together with recommendation 2, to adopt a balanced approach between accountability and learning, it might be argued that longer-serving independent heads of evaluation, who did not have the possibility of re-entering the organization as a programme manager, might better serve the organization's need for balancing the dual accountability and learning purposes of evaluation by remaining in the position. Furthermore, in smaller United Nations system organizations, establishing a dedicated evaluation office might not be cost-effective, and hence term limits in the context of a specialized technical organization could lead to the loss of experience and technical knowledge.

Recommendation 5

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), should request the United Nations Evaluation Group to collaborate in developing a robust and harmonized quality assurance system for the evaluation function across the United Nations system.

12. Noting that the United Nations Evaluation Group has been continuously working on methodologies to improve the quality assurance process for the evaluation function across the United Nations system, organizations welcomed and supported recommendation 5, especially if the work relating to the request were presented and proposed at future meetings of the United Nations Evaluation Group as part of its annual programme of work. However, they also noted that, unless the quality assurance system could operate independently, for example, outside the control and influence of the United Nations Evaluation Group, its value and credibility might be limited. They also noted that resources would be required to support efforts to develop quality assurance systems, and pointed out the current status, whereby large organizations had been able to undergo a quality assurance process, whereas smaller entities had found it difficult to do so, especially because of the cost involved.

Recommendation 6

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should make the use of evaluation an organizational priority based on a well-defined vision, strategy and results framework for the evaluation function, and report to their legislative bodies on the level, nature and impact of use of evaluation.

13. Organizations supported recommendation 6, which, they noted, fostered learning and transparency, as well as efforts to embed evaluation throughout their work, including through developing their decentralized evaluation functions. However, some organizations noted that the recommendation was focused on the process, which might vary depending on the requirements and size of the organization.

Recommendation 7

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should request evaluation offices to reassess the policies, strategies and priorities of the evaluation function. They should strategically position the evaluation function in their respective organizations so as to enhance its relevance in enabling the United Nations system to address current changes and challenges, and to achieve impact and sustainability.

14. Organizations supported recommendation 7, recognizing the importance of strategically positioning the evaluation function in a context of global changes and demands for sustainable development.

Recommendation 8

The Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of CEB, should initiate steps and support innovations for collaboration among United Nations system organizations and with other partners in strengthening national capacities for evaluation addressing accountability, learning and knowledge development of both national and global value.

15. Organizations supported recommendation 8.

Recommendation 9

The executive heads of United Nations system organizations should develop the institutional framework and necessary support systems to enhance the quality and added value of decentralized evaluation and the role it could play in supporting the United Nations system to address emerging challenges, including those of the post-2015 development agenda, and to enhance coherence and alignments in evaluation within and across United Nations system organizations and with national institutions.

16. Many organizations expressed support for recommendation 9, with several noting that responsibility for the implementation of the recommendation should rest with a centralized evaluation function, since the offices involved provided methodological support and ensured that the evaluation capacities of decentralized evaluation offices were well developed. Organizations also pointed out that decentralization could be a complex exercise to undertake that required considerable investment in improving the evaluation capacity of field offices and staff, and would require time, leadership, investment and sustained commitment.